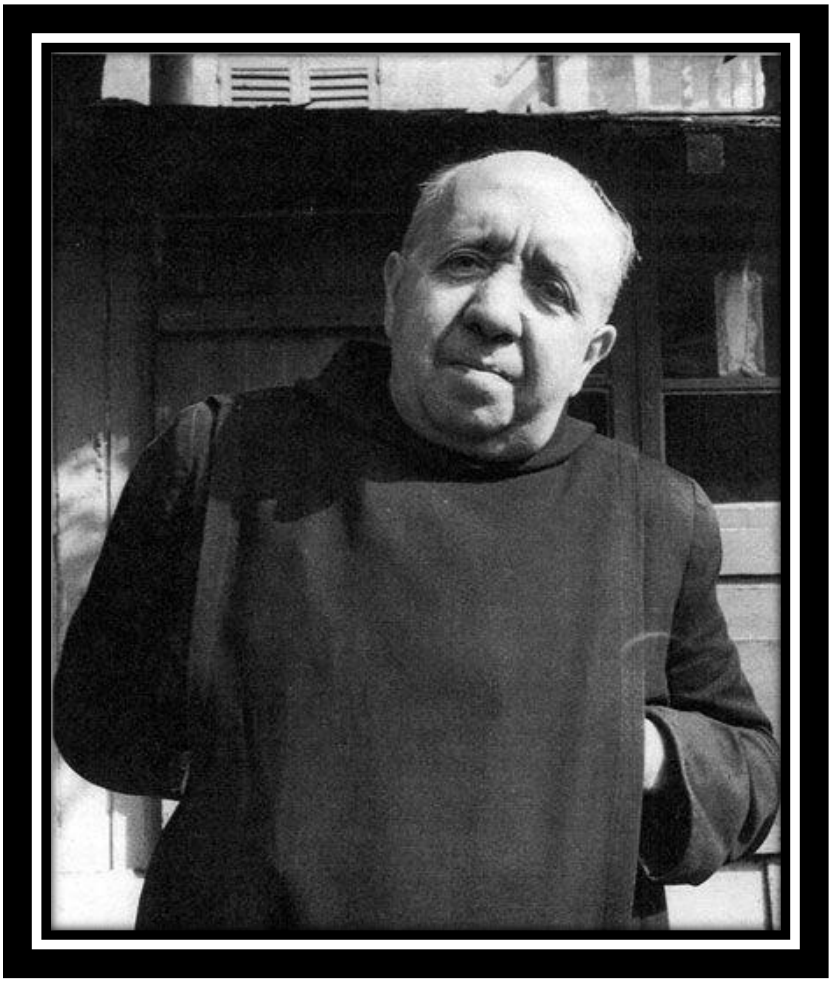
The Life of Blessed Dom Denis Chambault

The Miracle Working Benedictine Saint of the Western Rite

By Raphael of Montreal



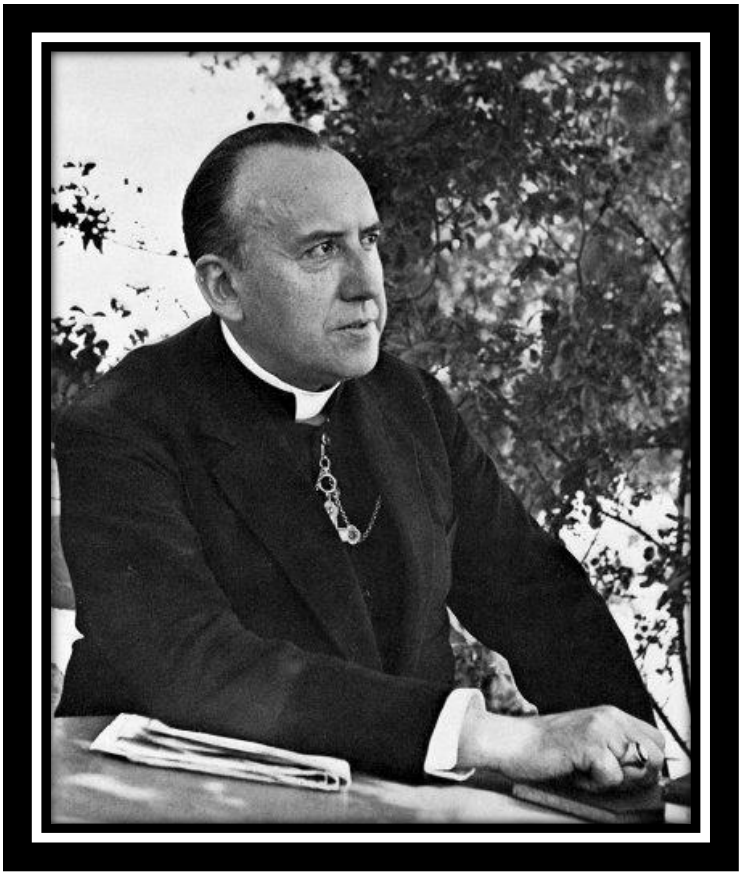
Blessed Denis Chambault, known to the world as Lucien, was born on the 22nd of January, 1899 AD, in Paris, France. He was the son of a French father, and an English mother, and raised in a non-religious household. At the age of approximately five, Blessed Denis fell seriously ill whilst traveling with his mother across England, nearly dying as a result. Slowly, his health began to recover but with the fear of his death looming over his family, his aunts in England decided to have him baptized in the Anglican Church; a foreshadowing of his later courageous acts and miraculous works. It was also at this time that his young heart became filled with a yearning for the divine, and his mind grew inquisitive, searching for the truth.

Upon his return to France, Denis started to attend an English school where he was educated in Christian doctrines according to the Anglican catechism. He also attended the services of multiple denominations,

seeking to understand the Christian faith in its fullness. To help provide income for his family, he entered into the field of journalism, working as an editor for Le Petite Parisian, a prominent newspaper during the French Third Republic. Following the death of his father in 1912, Denis was confirmed into the Anglican Church, whose services he began to attend regularly.

During these formative years he drew closer to God and His Saints and Angels. Whilst reminiscing on his childhood, Blessed Denis is noted as saying that it was at this time, around the age of 14, that he began a meaningful prayer life and with it, felt awaken within him a desire to enter the priesthood. To achieve this, he sought to be educated by the greatest Anglican schools in England, however, this dream never materialized, instead, he spent the remainder of his youth in prayer and continuing his career as a journalist, leaving Le Petite Parisian to write articles on art history for the English Daily Mail.

In July, 1922, at the age of 23, Blessed Denis met Louis Charles Winnaert, a former Catholic priest turned Old Catholic bishop, head and founder of the Evangelical Catholic Church (not to be confused with the Lutheran movement or church founded by Karl-Wilhelm Naundorff of the same name), an independent church which had splintered from the Union of Ultrecht that same year. The two grew quite close, resulting in Blessed Denis joining Louis as a parishioner of his church, an act which unbeknownst to Denis, would lead him on the path to the Orthodox faith.



Louis Charles Winnaert.

Three years later, Louis ordained Blessed Denis into the Old Catholic priesthood, and put him in charge of a small house church in Paris named Church of the Ascension, located on street 72, Sèvres. Denis lived twelve years as an Old Catholic priest, during which his love for the Latin patrimony of the West

deepened and strengthened, due in part to the Holy Mass he would perform and because of the influence of his mentor Louis. Meanwhile, a year prior to Denis' ordination, 8 Russian Orthodox emigrants founded the Brotherhood of St. Photios, of which, among the founders include notable figures such as Vladimir Lossky, Maxime Kovalevsky, and Eugraph Kovalevsky, later known as Fr. Jean-Nectaire of the Orthodox Church of France.

Eugraph Kovalevsky. / Fr. Jean-Nectaire of St. Denis.

The goal of the brotherhood was to restore Western Orthodoxy within the canonical communion of the Orthodox Church, with each member dedicating themselves to researching and promoting elements of the pre-schism West, including history, theology, ecclesiology, liturgics, iconography, the lives of the Saints, and music. It is in this spirit that the Brotherhood wrote the following manifesto:

"We proclaim and confess that the Orthodox Church is the one, true Church of Christ. That she is not only Eastern, but that she is the Church of all peoples on earth, of the East, of the West, of the North and of the South. That each people, each nation has its personal right in the Orthodox Church, its autocephalous canonical constitution, the safeguarding of its customs, its rites, and its liturgical language. United by dogma and canonical principles, the Churches shall embrace the people of any given place. We oppose and condemn any attempt – 1. to limit the Orthodox Church; 2. to separate the churches from each other; 3. to submit a church to another more powerful church. – We confess unity in multiplicity and freedom, in the name of the Father, of the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

In God's providence, Louis Charles Winnaert came into contact with the Brotherhood in 1927 and through their connections began a correspondence with Metropolitan Sergius of Moscow (later to be installed as the Patriarch of Russia during the onset of Communist persecutions). Louis had been made

aware of Orthodoxy for a handful of years due to French translations of the Byzantine Liturgy and a local parish in Paris, however his interest remained passive, fearing that his desire to preserve Western tradition would exclude him from ever being welcomed.

The authenticity of Apostolic faith and love expressed by the Brotherhood towards France appealed to the Old Catholic bishop, planting the seed for his eventual conversion. Blessed Denis, likewise, was smitten by Orthodoxy, and actively encouraged Louis to convert whilst negotiations between both parties developed over the span of 9 years, culminating in Met. Sergius and the Synod of the Holy Russian Orthodox Church approving their request to join the true Church and permitting them to retain their liturgical tradition and Gregorian calendar. On June 16th, 1936, the Church of the Ascension was officially accepted as a Western Rite Orthodox Church.

By December 1st, 1936, Louis, who at the time was bed ridden with illness, was made an Orthodox priest, tonsured as a monk under the name Irenaeus, and in February became an Archimandrite, shortly before his death on March 3rd, 1937, due to many years of uremia. Blessed Denis followed suit, initially being received by the church as a layman and then quickly being made into a deacon and later, an Orthodox priest; his dream of finding the absolute truth and becoming a presbyter was finally realized. In Louis' will, he entrusted the leadership of his church to his dear friend, now elevated to the rank of rector, and their mutual associate, Eugraph Kovalevsky, who had been ordained alongside Denis. The first Western Orthodox service in nearly a millennium was held on the day of his funeral, under the direction of Kovalevsky. It is around this time that Denis began to study the Benedictine tradition, under the guidance of a friend and fellow priest, Fr. Athanasius.

Immediately, conflicts arose between Kovalevsky and Denis due to their differing philosophies in how to restore Western tradition and lead the Church of France. The former, in keeping with the work he had published under the Brotherhood, strongly believed that an authentic French Orthodoxy was not Roman or Latin in origin, but rather the faith of the Gauls transmitted by the East, citing the Apostle Trofim, St. Dionysius the Aeropagite, St. Lazarus of Bethany, and St. Irenaeus of Lyon as examples. To this end, he intended to restore the Gallican Liturgy of St. Germanus of Paris, a project which would later find mild success with the aid of St. John Maximovitch, a prominent hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (R.O.C.O.R.).

Blessed Denis responded to Eugraph by saying "Such clinical reconstructions of ancient rites are dangerous, innovative, and can only serve to discredit the Church.", and opted instead to promote the Roman Rite and Benedictine Rule, in which he believed the genuine character of Frankish Orthodoxy had been liturgically preserved. More importantly, Denis argued that the Roman tradition was more suited to serve the pastoral needs of France, due to its long-standing history and familiarity. So extreme was their enmity that after Denis threatened his own resignation, the hierarchy had to intervene and separate the two men by sending Eugraph to another parish to temporarily serve pastoral duties.

Denis' proposal for the Western Rite would later be vindicated, becoming the standard blueprint, alongside the foundations set by his predecessor, fellow visionary, Julian Joseph Overbeck (1820 – 1905), for the modern Western Rite offered by R.O.C.O.R and Antioch. The two then went their separate ways, with Kovalevsky later becoming the rector of his own parish in June, 1944, named after St. Irenaeus of Lyon.

Just as an internal conflict had been resolved, a crisis of cataclysmic proportions struck the world with the outbreak of World War 2, and with it, a halt on most Russian Orthodox activity and Western Rite growth;

the Russian hierarchy suffered under the weight of communism, rendering their ability to administer and provide support difficult, and with the German occupation of France, any links between local clergy and Russia, became a dangerous association to live with, should any National Socialists suspect them of anti-fascist sympathies. Kovalevsky was drafted into the French army, and was later captured by the Germans, spending most of the war in camps and prison, until his liberation, upon which he returned to his ministry. Meanwhile, Blessed Denis, who, since ordination, had been balancing his ministry with his work as a journalist to provide stable income, seeing the tides of war lean in the favor of the National Socialists, reluctantly decided along with the Daily Mail's editorial staff, to evacuate Paris prior to the occupation, arriving in the city of Bordeaux where he continued to write articles. Denis, however, could not bear being separated from his flock, and so he quickly returned to Paris to look after his parishioners.

Thus, as Moscow could not undertake the episcopal care necessary to singlehandedly lead their churches in France, Metropolitan Eleutherius united all Eastern Rite churches under Moscow and Western Rite communities into one diocese by decree on March 31st, 1939. Soon thereafter Blessed Denis was offered the position of dean over the diocese and given the name of Stephen; his tenure did not last long as Denis decided that his lack of fluency in Russian hindered his ability to properly lead, hence, he was then made the vicar of said diocese.

Now it happened that the Jews of France were under threat of arrest, imprisonment and death, urging the church to protect their Jewish neighbors. In response to this call, Archimandrite Athanasius, rector of the Church of the Three Hierarchs on street 26, Alleray, invited Blessed Denis to join him in protecting Jews from danger. Blessed Denis, without hesitation, accepted this responsibility and moved to the parish. For Jews who earnestly desired the salvation of Christ after realizing the frailty of fallen life, Blessed Denis and Arch. Athanasius baptized them in secret, bringing them into the bosom of the church and body of Christ. For Jews who had no interest in following Christ, the two gifted them older baptismal certificates to pose as Christians.

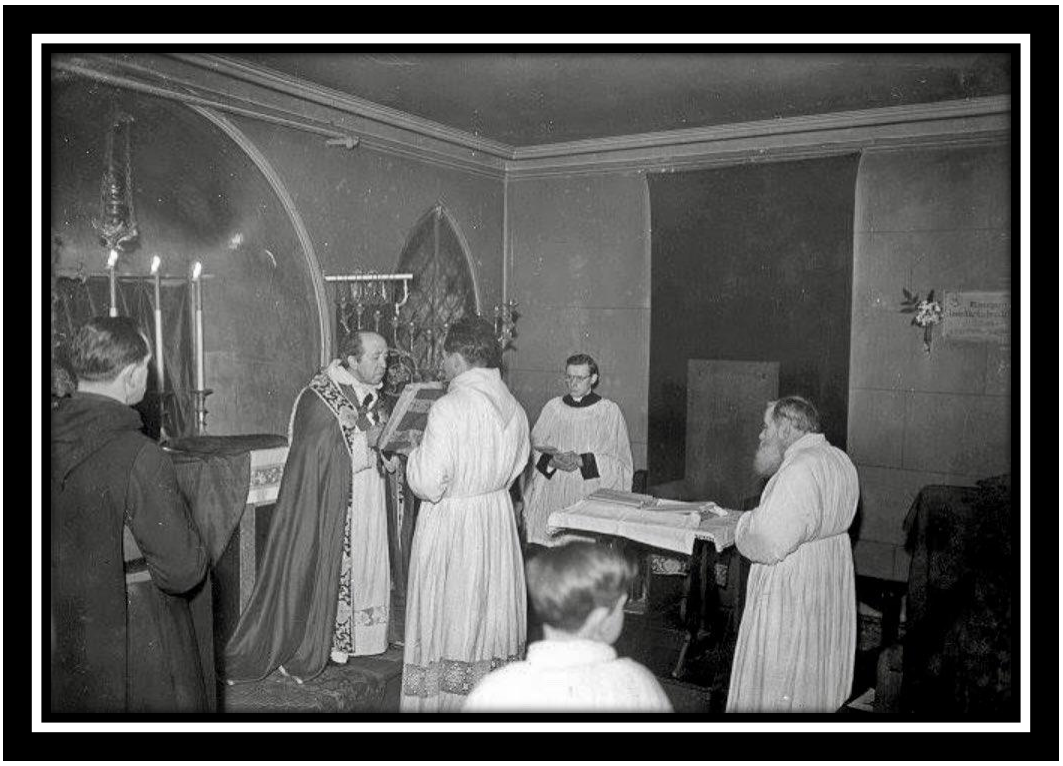
These courageous acts threatened their very lives, and yet Blessed Denis, like the good Samaritan, treated his fellow man with the dignity owed to Christ and God's creation, protecting the weak and sheltering the despised. Arch. Athanasius, on the other hand, had his life tragically taken by the Gestapo after being arrested in the middle of a church service, dying of exhaustion in a prison cell. Like iron forged in fire, Blessed Denis' resolve became increasingly meek and saintly, having spent his entire life wrestling with the dangers of illness, death, and now, injustice.

Denis alternated between his duties at the Church of the Ascension, serving daily liturgies, and aiding the congregation of the Three Hierarchs, until Baptists who had been sharing the building of the Ascension whenever it was not occupied, demanded that all Orthodox imagery be removed, threatening that they would no longer rent from the congregation for their space, forcing Denis to relocate his parish into the same building as the Three Hierarchs, where he would also live for the remainder of his life. The two effectively became the same community, with two altars arranged in the basement so that it may serve both Rites. The name of Church of the Ascension was kept, and it was consecrated to the patronage of St. Denis of Paris and St. Seraphim of Sarov. Regarding the choice of these two Saints, Blessed Denis stated "The East, embodied in the person of this great Russian Saint, and the West, in the person of the first Bishop of Paris, have met, bringing Eastern and Western Orthodox people together for a common cause."

The church was comprised of approximately 100 parishioners. Among its many visitors, include Serge Bolshakoff, who described the church as follows:

“The front door opens on to a quiet and restful hall. The small chapel, where healing services take place, is nearby. Many votive candles and lamps burn there. The chapel is small, humble, unpretentious, but it has a peculiar atmosphere of rest and hopefulness. Behind the house is a charming small garden. Although the house is situated in a noisy and thickly populated district, it is very quiet. This small house always reminds me of a very different place — the grandiose Benedictine Abbey of Silos in Spain...The small house in the rue d'Alleray, like Silos, is an oasis of peace and joy in the heart of a great capital where souls suffer from the troubles, sins and unhappiness usual to big cities. Moreover, it too, is a Benedictine establishment...A parish is attached to the Priory.”

Church of the Ascension on Street 26, Alleray.



Blessed Denis in the midst of a service.

Simultaneously, it was also at this time in which Blessed Denis felt called to monasticism, which in turn set him on the path towards restoring the Benedictine tradition for the Orthodox Church. He met monks belonging to the Eastern Rite, who then blessed his endeavors, and on March 5th, 1944, 3 months prior to the beginning of France's liberation, Blessed Denis was tonsured a priestmonk. This was the fateful day in which Lucien became known as Denis, in honor of St. Denis of Paris. A fitting name for a Parisian who became the first canonical Benedictine monk in over 600 years and whose life has since become a testament to French Orthodoxy and the fruits of the Western Rite.

Throughout 1945, Blessed Denis underwent the process of editing the Divine Office, purging it of any Catholic innovations, so as to restore it to its pre-schism state. He also translated the entirety of the Office for daily recitals in French, and after arduous research, restored the Benedictine ritual for reception and profession of monks, thus establishing the first Orthodox Benedictine community since the fall of the Amalfinon Monastery on Mt. Athos, 8 centuries prior. By August he was elevated to the rank of Abbot, and had tonsured two monks, naming them John and Benedict; he also maintained close ties with the aforementioned Eastern Rite monks, several of whom decided to share community life with the Benedictines.

Although Blessed Denis had accrued many accomplishments, he was always motivated first and foremost by his own desire to obey God's will, materializing the dream for a Western Rite, not to please his own sensibilities but inadvertently as a product of his unceasing love for God and tender care for the spiritually malnourished peoples of the West. God favored Denis' burning heart, and gifted him with the charism of healing. Year by year, the Church of the Ascension attracted pilgrims, all of whom sought to speak with Blessed Denis after Mass, in hopes that he'd pray for them, so that they may be healed of their ailments. Time and time again, Denis answered questions, responded to letters, adjusted his schedule for the sake of

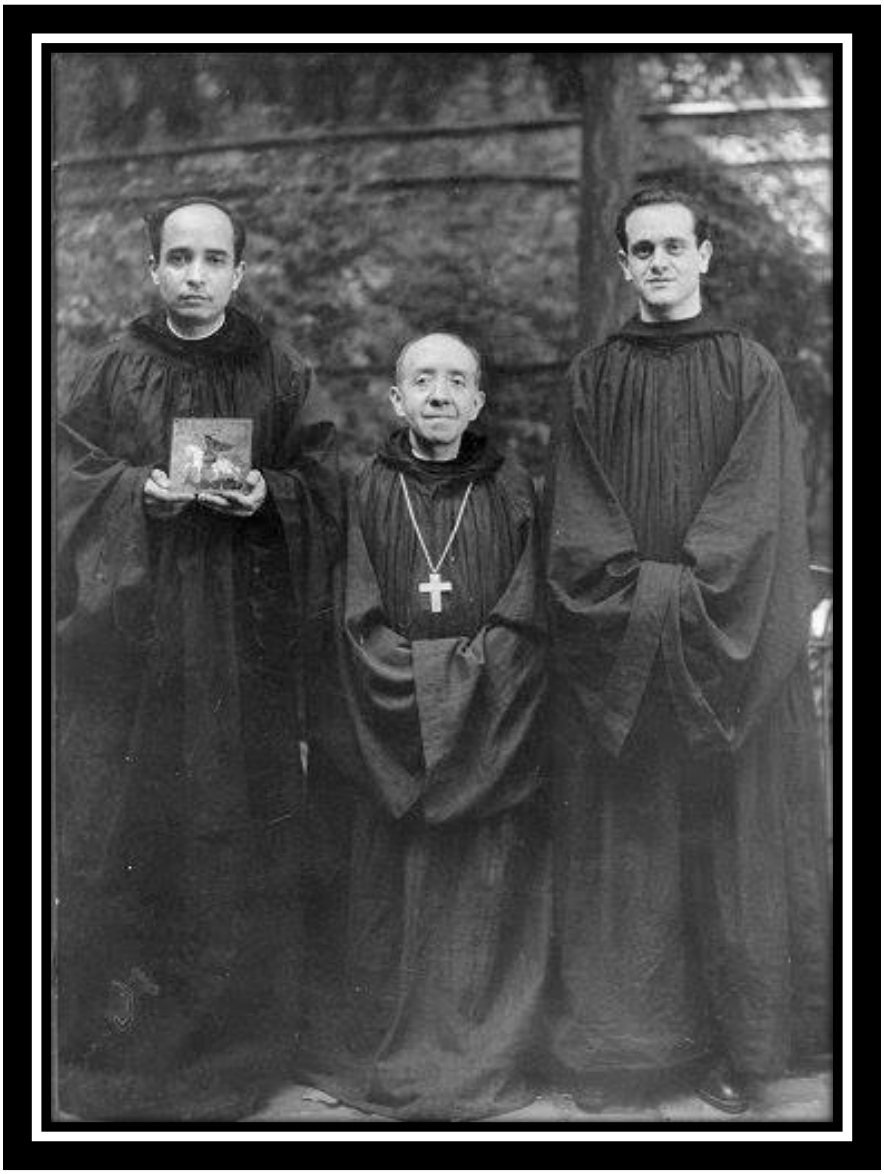
others, and fulfilled any and all requests; he tended to the poor, the sick, the elderly, orphans, and immigrants in need of help, delivering to them food and clothes. It appears that Denis' transfiguration was nearly complete.

For the remainder of the 1940s and throughout the next decade, Blessed Denis continued his ministry, monastic lifestyle, almsgiving and ecclesiastical duties for his diocese. In 1948, he visited the Soviet Union to participate in the Pan-Orthodox Conference of Moscow, working on the Commission "The Ecumenical Movement and the Orthodox Church." Later in the following year, he was elevated to the rank of Archimandrite, and in 1956, he visited Moscow for a second time to celebrate services with them and speak with the hierarchs. In the summer of 1960, he visited Moscow once more, expressing to the Patriarchate his hopes, concerns, and proposals for the state of French Orthodoxy, encouraging more missionary activity.

On the rare occasions where he was not busy with all of his responsibilities, Blessed Denis enjoyed to spend time in the garden of his chapel, remarking the beauty of God's creation, on one occasion documenting his thoughts to a friend in a letter "Today I cut down one of the last tea roses in our garden. Just beginning to unfold, this rose stands before me on our table, in a small vase, just narrow enough for one flower. Beautiful in form, color, and fragrance, it makes me think of what the Kingdom of God might be like in The Endless Day". Whether in obliviousness or prophetic wisdom, Denis foreshadowed his death, looming over him once more, as it did when he was an infant. God deemed it time to bring Denis back to his eternal home.

In the spring of 1965, Blessed Denis' health deteriorated rapidly, and by Holy Week, he was no longer able to serve. Blessed Denis reposed in the Lord on May 3rd, 1965, at the age of 67, leaving behind his garden for the garden of the Lord where he now lives among God's flowers. Some of his last words, uttered a few minutes prior to his death, are reported to have been a message of guidance left behind for his brethren on Earth "In the Gospel is everything, everything...especially Matthew 25!". It is said that as soon as he stopped breathing, his face appeared younger, and he seemed to be resting, as if he were joyfully sleeping. He is buried in a small cemetery next to his mother in Lumigny, near Paris.

Those who knew Denis describe him as a man who personified love, peace, delicacy, patience and goodwill towards all people. He devoted himself to monastic poverty, only eating meals that were given to him; to spreading knowledge and sharing treasures of the faith, through his many years of publishing and ministry; and to being a comforter for the lonely, mentally ill, poor, and persecuted. In his efforts to alleviate the suffering of others, he imitated St. Seraphim of Sarov, and in doing so, likewise became a healer of the sick, and ultimately, a Saint.



Sanctus Dionysius, Ora Pro Nobis!

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